



PRESS RELEASE

House Armed Services Committee

Floyd D. Spence, Chairman

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OPENING STATEMENT OF CHAIRMAN SPENCE

FULL COMMITTEE HEARING ON THE BOMBING OF THE U.S.S. COLE

The committee meets today to examine the circumstances surrounding the bombing of the U.S.S. Cole in Yemen.

On October 12 of this year, seventeen brave American sailors lost their lives and nearly three dozen others were wounded as a result of the latest despicable act of terrorism against the United States. Our condolences go out to the families of those killed and wounded in this attack. This tragic incident is yet another reminder that freedom is not free, and that those who wear the uniform of the United States military place their lives on the line every day to ensure our freedom and security.

Terrorism directed against U.S. interests and personnel is not new, particularly in that part of the world. Four years ago, 19 U.S. service personnel died in the bombing of the Khobar Towers complex in Saudi Arabia. Two years ago, scores of people were killed and injured in the bombings of U.S. embassies in Kenya and Tanzania.

Regardless of who is ultimately found to be responsible for the attack on the Cole, the enemies of the United States should take note: the United States, as a global power with global interests, will not be driven out of the Middle East or anywhere else as the result of terrorist acts. This or any other terrorist attack will only strengthen our resolve to protect our interests and we are firmly determined to swiftly identify and punish the cowardly perpetrators of this attack.

However, at present, many questions related to this incident remain unanswered. And while we mourn the senseless loss of many young lives, we have an obligation to begin to understand the circumstances and situation that led to this tragedy.

The U.S.S. Cole was en route to the Persian Gulf to conduct maritime operations in the legitimate pursuit of U.S. national security interests abroad. It was moored in the port of Aden for refueling. Why Aden was chosen as the place to conduct this refueling operation is important to understand.

Were there viable options that could have been chosen that would have placed U.S. sailors at less risk? Could the Cole have been refueled at sea? Published reports indicate that the United States received intelligence warnings of a possible terrorist attack against U.S. targets in the region last month. Were these

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warning assessed as credible? In light of the escalating violence in other parts of the Middle East, should threats to the United States have been viewed with more seriousness than usual?

Initial reports indicated that the boat that attacked the Cole was assisting with the mooring of the ship in Aden harbor. The Navy has now revised this account, stating that the Cole had been moored for nearly an hour and a half and was well into the refueling process when the attack occurred. How was it possible that the small boat carrying hundreds of pounds of explosives could have approached the Cole as it was refueling without the boat being challenged?

This committee and the Congress have a responsibility to diligently pursue answers to these questions. The American people must feel confident that their mothers, fathers, sons, and daughters in uniform are as safe and secure as possible when they are called upon to exercise their duty in defense of our country and its interests.

In this regard, I must take a moment to express my frustration with the difficulty the committee has encountered in getting the Department of Defense to support today's hearing. The committee requested that the Secretary of Defense, the Commander-in-Chief of Central Command, and the Chief of Naval Operations appear today to discuss in both open and closed session the U.S.S. Cole incident. Instead, the Department has agreed to provide a partial witnesses lineup for today's open session, and has taken the position that they will only discuss one very narrow subject.

I want the record to reflect that I consider the Department's position unacceptable and completely contrary to historical precedent and practice. Let me be absolutely clear. This is not about how to handle the classified aspects of this issue. The committee is the first to recognize and agree with the need to have a separate closed forum to properly protect associated classified information.

My objection relates to the Department's attempts to dictate which non-classified information it is willing to openly discuss with Congress and under what circumstances. This position directly undermines the long-standing relationship between the committee and the Department of Defense and it runs counter to the Rules of the House of Representatives and our system of open government.

With that clarification, let me advise members that we will proceed today by first hearing from:

- Walter Slocombe, Under Secretary of Defense for Policy;
- General Tommy Franks, United States Army, Commander-in-Chief of U.S. Central Command; and
- Edward Walker, Assistant Secretary of State of Near East and South Asia

The committee will then move into executive session to also receive testimony from:

- Admiral Vern Clark, Chief of Naval Operations; and
- Admiral Thomas Wilson, Director of the Defense Intelligence Agency.

At the appropriate point in today's proceedings, we will entertain a motion to authorize the committee to continue in executive session for national security purposes. This session will be conducted at the Top Secret CODEWORD level and will be held in Room 2212 which has been properly secured for this purpose.

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